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As North Korea's death toll mounts, evangelical aid battles malnutrition

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WASHINGTON (BP)—Five years of famine in North Korea have taken the lives of at least 1 million people and, in the words of Tony Hall, an Ohio congressman and evangelical, left the youngest population “in worse condition than the average African child.”

Food shortages have left 62 percent of children younger than 7 with stunted growth and 16 percent suffering from acute malnutrition and underweight for their height, according to a report by researchers from the World Food Program, UNICEF and the European Union in November.

It is “a generation irretrievably lost,” reflected a front-page story in The New York Times

Dec. 10.

North Korea's malnutrition is higher than in any country in East Asia. While the 16 percent malnutrition figure among children falls short of the 18 percent in India and Bangladesh, The Times said those countries have some areas of relative plenty, while all of North Korea is to some degree underfed.

As the United States pressed in mid-January for access to a North Korean site suspected of being used to develop nuclear weapons, U.S.-based humanitarian efforts for the country's 23 million people were continuing.

A 6,000-metric-ton vessel, for example, was being prepared for transporting food, fertilizer, medical supplies, clothing and other relief aid worth more than \$8 million to Chongjin, North Korea, in an effort coordinated by Amigos Internacionales, an independent organization of Southern Baptist in Texas.

Amigos, which that sends volunteers to deliver such shipments and monitor their distribution, is part of a consortium of American agencies providing relief to North Korea since the communist country made a unprecedented appeal to the international community in 1995 for assistance in responding to massive flooding. Other groups in the consortium include World Vision, Mercy Corps, CARE and Catholic Relief Services.

After a five-day visit to North Korea in November, Hall said he believes nearly 3 million North Koreans have died of famine-related causes during the last five years, compared to the U.N. report's estimate of 1 million deaths.

In addition to famine's effects on the young, Hall said he had seen many adults with "skin darkened with malnutrition." In orphanages supplied by UNICEF, Hall said, "one in three children bore these and other telltale signs of slow starvation."

Jim Goering, director of international programs for World Vision in Washington, said although the 1998 harvest "was a relatively good one" in North Korea, "total grain production was only 3.5 million tons, and the total requirement there is about 5 million tons, so they're going to be dependent on external supplies."

Working in partnership with other agencies around the world, the agency is helping North Koreans on several fronts, including direct assistance to farmers, building and supplying food-making facilities, emergency food aid and children's health and welfare.

For the 1999 agricultural year, World Vision hopes to expand the number of cooperative farms it assists from four to seven. If the Pyongyang government agrees, Goering said, "We would include some farms in the poorer areas of the country." Most of those the agency now assists are in the grain-producing areas around Pyongyang.

Mercy Corps, based in Portland, Ore., ships food and medical supplies and has a project demonstrating methods to increase food production. It has also organized one international and two national conferences on the issues surrounding humanitarian aid to

North Korea.

“It’s a difficult thing to work with a country and a people who view international politics and international governments in different ways,” said Kathleen Brown, media relations officer for World Vision in Washington. “They’re such a closed society. I think we’re always concerned about how the U.S. government is working with the North Korean and South Koreans and the Chinese to defuse tensions in that part of the world.

“But I think the humanitarian community is trying to help the U.S. government to understand that far more has been gotten in terms of humanitarian agencies working within the country in the past three years” than to break off such relations, she said.

The work of Amigos Internacionales has been buffered by such international relations concerns, said Ken Dupuy, vice chairman and vice president of the agency.

Amigos’ headquarters are in Waco, Texas, and its international work is based in Longview, Texas. “We’re all Southern Baptists, a totally nonprofit organization, no employees, all volunteers,” Dupuy said. He stressed that the organization has no institutional ties to the Southern Baptist Convention’s International Mission Board or the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

In February, Amigos will launch a new program to send 300,000 metric tons of food to North Korea, which will be monitored by volunteers to see that it is distributed throughout the country.

“It’s been our general observation that the food is going to the most needy in North Korea,” Dupuy said. “Certainly we have not been given complete freedom to visit and to monitor the entire country. But where we have been, we have seen no evidence that the food is not going to those people to whom it was designated.”

Dupuy stressed although North Koreans know that the Amigos volunteers are Southern Baptists, “We’re not permitted, either by our government or by the North Korean government, to go out to be evangelists.” However, he noted, “If we sustain these people, in all probability someone else will come along and tend to the spiritual growth of these people if we open the door or cause the door to be left open to make it available.”

Relief efforts by groups like Amigos Internacionales can also help change the North Koreans’ attitudes toward American Christians, Dupuy said.

“The children of North Korea are taught almost from the breast that Americans are demons, that they are Satan incarnate, that they are the greatest demons in the world,” he said. “Through our Good Samaritan activities of meeting their physical needs, hopefully we can show them that Americans are not that, and that Christian Americans are not that.”

And to people who might question working with a communist government to provide relief aid in a country with few Christians, Dupuy said, “They are people. They are human

beings. They have a living soul like the rest of us, and as Christians and as humanitarians we feel that it's both spiritually and physically necessary that people such as ourselves and agencies like ours do what we can to meet the needs of any and all peoples and not just selected ones.

“God created all of us, not just part of us. If we don't do it, who will?”

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